

Dry winds have blown so hard and long at the ranch, they have made themselves nervous. So nervous, the voices of the gales quaver and tremble, trilling the flute holes in the window jams and yodeling the train whistles in the eaves. Far into the nights, the ranch house rocks and rattles against the never-relenting gusts. The old door latches give way and bang loose, and the floor vibrates like foundations above subway tunnels.

Called "the 09 Divide," the fiercest air currents in the shortgrass country tear across the plateau, refreshing the bitterweed and rooting the mesquite trees far down into the black soil. Playa lakes, long empty and cracked by drouth, grow toxins so potent the woolies grazing down to the lake bottoms never return. Horses' feet grow long and brittle to rasp; and cows coming fresh in the spring forage on the green gourd vines and sour the milk. A dogie lamb's cry trademarks the spring. The weak and the strong grit their teeth and lean into forces that sap their energy and disarrange the simplest concentrations.

Old sailors say early risers of cheery dispositions and sensible eating habits never have seasickness. I say ride out a bad winter up here with shingles slapping on the roof and the tree limbs scratching against the window screens, and you can make passage around Cape Horn late of bed, mad

at the world, and with a belly full of chili pot pie without the slightest nausea.

The windswept denizens, however, learn tricks just like people on the floodplains learn to tread water and fight mildew. Takes awhile to catch on to playing the winds to keep a saddle blanket on long enough to throw the saddle on a horse's back. Takes a longer while to ride off in the face of a blue gray norther without yearning for the shelter of the breaks.

Hats can't be tied on up here even though they won't stay on longer than 10-minute intervals. If a hat slides off the back of the head and starts twirling in the wind, the chin strap will twist into a knot and strangle the rider. Been many a Mexican cowboy choked down from wearing the customary leather throngs those boys tie onto their sombreros. Fellow named L.D. White cut a boy from Musquiz loose from his chin strap one time just as he was turning purple. Lucky he was riding a gentle horse and L.D. had a sharp knife handy, or he'd of died a horrible death from strangulation and suffered the awful fate of being buried away from his homeland.

The solution is to choose a hat easy to chase and easy to find after it lands. The oldtime Laredo straw is the best summer hat, however, the material is so palatable that grasshoppers will eat off the brim if they are lost very long. Those plastic hats take wing like competition kites

and wad up in front so bad, a cap bill gives off more shade. After a felt model doubles its weight in dust and grease, they are safe in winds up to 55 miles an hour. In the winter, the weather is so blasted cold, a tie-down trapper's cap is a good choice.

One of the neighbors a long time ago before sunscreen cut eyeholes in her bonnet and wore it backwards all the time to keep from having freckles and wrinkles from the harsh winds, so she claimed. She was the oldest daughter and the last one in her family to be married. Her granny started the idea by making her bridal veil out of thick mosquito netting. Some say the way she wore her bonnet improved her looks a considerable amount; but I never was by her place after sundown, so I can't say how she looked without her bonnet.

Indoors on the worst nights, I play music as loud as the volume goes on the CD player to drown the wailing of the wind. Outdoors the next day, I chant like those Gregorian monks to block the screaming of the gales. The chants bring inner strength and throw off the whine of my hearing aids. However, beginners should rub vaseline on their lips. Chanting is a very dehydrating action.

Seems like that Mexican cowboy's name was Salvador Reyes. I know he was one of those good hands from Musquiz, Coahuila. "Musqueros" are half Seminole Indian and half African American, but they have Spanish names. One thing

certain, he never wore a chin strap again as long as he
worked up here ...